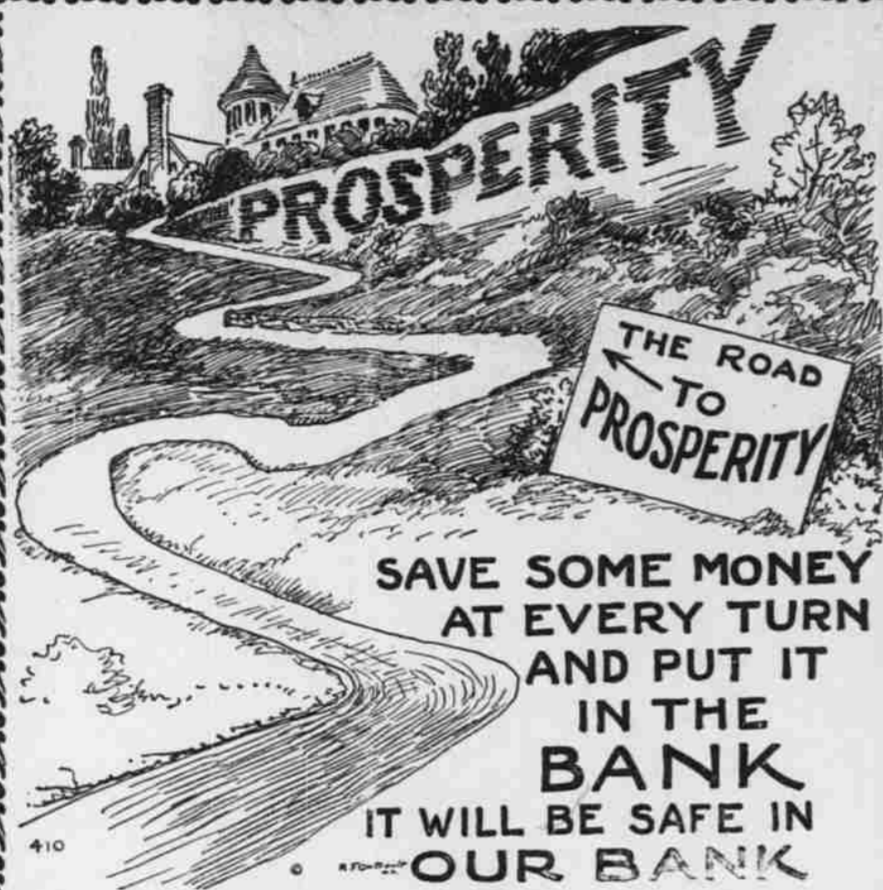


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Ruffin's Friend

An Easter Story

By JEANNETTE H. WALWORTH

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TO Ruffin, shifting restlessly from one dirty little bare foot to the other, the fastidious deliberation of the gentleman who was selecting an Easter lily from Mrs. Moxer's stock was not only exasperating, it was "tummyrot." One lily was just like another.

Ruffin stepped boldly between buyer and seller. He lifted a small, freckled face, made bright by a pair of winning blue eyes. "Mister, I'm lookin' for a job. I'll carry your lily home for you." The gentleman looked Ruffin over critically. Mrs. Moxer indulged the boy. "Oh, you can trust Ruff, sir."

The gentleman put his hand into his pocket. "All right, Chipmunk. A dime, isn't it?"

Ruffin shook his head. "Not yit. Wait till the goods is delivered. I wants a stop over privilege."

The gentleman laughed. He found Ruffin delightful. "All right, Chipmunk."

"Well, it's this way, sir. I got a friend. She's my friend all right, but she's heap closter of kin to the angels than she is to me. She bo'ds at the house where I jobs. I clean the steps and take out trash and such. She don't belong there, but I reck'n she's down on her luck. I was rattlin' out her stove one day last week, and I heard her sort of say to herself, 'Oh, if I only could smell the lilies once again it would make me well.' She do look mighty penked, mister. And I ups and says, pointin' to a big book she had



"I'LL CARRY YOUR LILY FOR YOU," open in her lap, is them lilies, Miss Gertrude? And she says: 'Ascension lilies, Ruff. You know what they stand for? And I had to own up I didn't, and then she talked to me like an angel might 'a' talked and told me more about the Bible and Jesus than I bet any of the preachers know. And I thought if she was sick for the smell

of the lilies I might help Miss Withers to get well. Is it a go, mister?"

"It is a go, Chipmunk. But," he handed Ruffin a card, "I will be at that address before 3 o'clock, and if you fail to show up what must I do about my lily?"

Ruffin grinned confidently. "Send the chief of police to Mrs. Bisland's bo'din' house on east Forty-six street and tell him to ask for James Ruffin Clark." And he was off.

At the street and number engraved on the card a morris chair was pushed up to a front window by the lily buyer. A quarter to 3 by his watch—would the Chipmunk show up? The doorbell rang.

He called to the white capped maid as she passed to open it. "If it is a boy with a lily, bring him in here."

Enter Ruffin, crimson from rapid walking but with the light of triumph in his eyes. "The big clock out yonder's jus' strikin' 3, Mr. Marshchalk."

"Well, Chipmunk, did your lady friend take a smell of it? Put the flower there on that stand in the window. And did it make her well?"

"I don't know about it makin' her well, sir, but she said it made her glad, and then she bust out cryin'."

"When I'm glad, I gins. Don't you?"

"Invariably, Ruffin."

Ruffin drew a crumpled envelope from the bosom of his faded blouse. "And you asked me her name, sir. They'd just emptied the waste paper baskets into the trash barrel in the area, and this was on top."

Marshchalk glanced at the envelope, but de-crued it as a possession—Miss Gertrude Withers. "All right, Chipmunk. Now let's talk about James Ruffin Clark."

"Oh, he don't count for nuthin, sir," said Ruffin with an easy laugh, which sobered into an awestruck expression as an elegant lady with big black eyes and snowy white hair entered.

Marshchalk rose to his feet. "Hello, mater; this young gentleman brought out your Easter lily."

It was at the luncheon table that Marshchalk's mother gave him a message: "Lloyd, Cornelia sent you word that she wanted you to be sure to come to church tomorrow. You know she is directing the music this year. They have secured a wonderful soloist, and your sister wants your opinion of the girl's voice. I think Mr. Davenport, our organist, is trying to interest your sister in this young woman. She is a fine musician and, having been thrown on her own resources, has conceived that it is easy to get pupils in New York. At any rate, Miss Withers is boarding in the same house as Mr. Davenport. Cornelia is quite stirred up about her."

Marshchalk passed his cup. "It seems," Mrs. Marshchalk pursued, "that this girl was joint heir and owner of a very fine cotton plantation near Chattanooga with an older brother. The older brother must have been a scamp of the first water. He came on to New York, leaving her living on the plantation, where she had always lived. It appears he went it at a pace. Before three years were over he had got this poor girl to give him powers of attorney, and it was only after he had the decency to dispose of himself that she found out he had mortgaged the plantation for more than it was worth, and the mortgage was foreclosed, leaving her penniless."

"You did not happen to hear the brother's name, mother?" Marshchalk asked in a queer voice.

"No, nor the name of the man into whose pocket her home passed."

Marshchalk was in his mother's pew on that Easter Sunday. He listened with a pleasure that verged upon pain to the rich young voice that swelled above the grand organ notes in "Consider the Lilies." The voice was divine. And—her name was Withers!

Marshchalk's mind traveled swiftly backward to the time when Eugene Withers stood before him, a wild, disheveled boy, almost pleading for help. Withers had been his roommate and chum at Harvard—a wild, reckless, unbalanced boy. He got the help he asked for—got it time and again until, with patience exhausted, Marshchalk had mildly suggested some sort of guarantee or security for the large sums. It was then that the mortgage was given and accepted. A little while longer and Withers had shuffled off responsibility with the mortal coil.

It was perhaps a week after hearing that wonderful voice in church that Marshchalk called on his sister Cornelia. "Well, what progress is your southern friend making in the matter of pupils?" he asked with a nervous laugh. "Poor girl, I pity her!"

"Oh, you would indeed, Lloyd, if you could only see her—the gentlest, prettiest, most patient little thing. Oh, I wish you could see her!"

He did see her. He saw her again and again. Months had passed when Marshchalk, going up the now familiar steps, met Ruffin coming down them. They stood together on Mrs. Bisland's stoop. Marshchalk extracted a ten dollar bill from his pocketbook and held it out to Ruffin.

"What's that fur, boss?"

"For you to get a new suit."

"What fur, boss?"

"Because you need it, Ruff, and because in a way you were instrumental in making me know your friend, Miss Gertrude. She and I are to be married next month, Ruffin, and I don't want you to disgrace her in church."

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